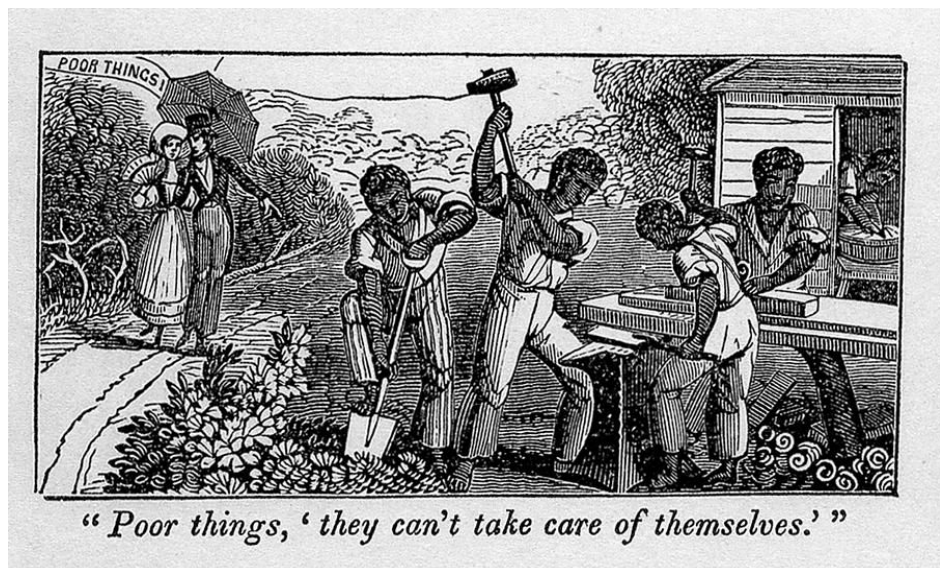


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The Abolition of Slavery: A Myth and its Realities

A white couple blissfully strolls past a group of five slave laborers. Three of the laborers appear to be metalworking and woodworking with mallets and chisels, while one is gardening with a large shovel. The fifth laborer is washing clothes with a wooden basin in a small shed-like structure. Although the laborers are engaged in distinct forms of work, they are all wearing loose-fitting shirts and trousers with no shoes. Meanwhile, the white couple exudes an upper-class presence with fashion that mimics that of the rich members of



society in the Victorian era. The man is wearing a tight-fitting single-breasted vest with a shawl collar, light trousers that look tailored to his long legs, and a top hat with wide brims. The woman is wearing a tightly laced corset over a chemisette with a skirt adorned with embroideries. This description is of *Poor things*, 'they can't take care of themselves', a political cartoon housed in the Library of Congress that was published in the 1840 American Anti-Slavery Almanac. Although the line art itself is captivating, what is most striking about this illustration is the irony of the white man describing the slave laborers as unable to take care of themselves,

when in reality, the white individuals are the ones that have likely never performed manual labor. The white savior complex and white supremacist ideals continue to prevail as systemic racism upholds modern forms of slavery through targeted policing and mass incarceration, despite the 13th amendment's abolition of slavery.

The 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1865 after the Civil War, abolished slavery; or so we thought. It states: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction" (US). The punishment clause, which allows involuntary servitude when convicted of a crime, shows that "slavery is with us still" (Farley). This clause has given rise to a prison-industrial complex where over half the inmates are Black, despite Black individuals making up only 13% of the US population (Wood). With a disproportionate number of Black individuals sitting behind bars, the "story of progress up from slavery is a lie" (Farley). The facade of progress is even evident in the *Poor things, 'they can't take care of themselves'* political cartoon. The white couple depicted are seen walking on a well-constructed pathway that is never-ending which symbolizes the way in which white folk are able to progress in a never-ending manner by profiting off the work of people of color and occupying the majority of the upper class. Meanwhile, the slave laborers are depicted in a field that is not urbanized and is sectioned off from the well-constructed pathway by a row of plants. This symbolizes the way in which modern forms of slavery suppress Black folk into fulfilling the role of the laborer and foreclose the possibility of true progress.

Even without symbolism from the *Poor things, 'they can't take care of themselves'* political cartoon, it is clear that slavery has yet to truly be abolished. One of the modern forms of slavery is the targeted criminalization, and thus, policing of Black folk. Policing "can be traced

directly to slavery and the racial regime it relies on and violently sustains” (Hasbrouck). During the Reconstruction era, new crimes as vague as “malicious mischief” allowed law enforcement to send more Black folk to prison than ever before. Over 150 years after the 13th amendment, nothing has changed. The predominantly white policymakers in the criminal justice system have created a number of laws surrounding statutory crimes, harsh sentences, and enforcement policies that disproportionately affect those at a racial and economic disadvantage (Pope). By disproportionately sending more Black folk to prison, these laws have perpetuated “a false narrative of Black criminality,” which only further the exertion of extreme repression and control by law enforcement (Hasbrouck). This self-reinforcing loop has served as a justification to overpolice and oppress communities with a large minority population for decades.

Overpolicing communities of color has become even less difficult with the massive influx of advanced surveillance technology. Consequently, the nation has shifted from a postcrime to a precrime society (Mantello). Instead of police investigating crimes that have been committed, policing has become predictive. Risk assessment associated with surveillance technology allows law enforcement to predict crimes before the crimes are even committed. Not only is this precrime shift evident in the way law enforcement interacts with Black populations, but it even extends to how law enforcement chooses where to position police officers geographically with higher concentrations of officers in communities of color. This precrime shift also has implications across the broader criminal justice system. Instead of “due process where people are innocent until proven guilty,” society is moving towards “a new era where crimes are committed before they happen” (Mantello). This emerging trend of predictive policing allows law enforcement to shift the blame of racist policing practices away from individual racist officers onto a broader racist technological frame. The lack of accountability from law enforcement has

created a nation where police officers are able to routinely steal the lives of innocent Black folk without facing repercussions.

Of the many Black folk whose lives were unjustly stolen, two specific individuals' passing instigated waves of police brutality protests all across the nation this year. The first individual was Breonna Taylor, an African American woman who was fatally shot in her own apartment on March 13th, 2020. In an attempt to conduct a botched drug raid for an investigation of Taylor's ex, white police officers forcibly entered Taylor's home and shot her 6 times. Many drew parallels to slave patrols during the Reconstruction era where white civilians would "forcefully enter homes to look for criminal activity" in communities of color simply because they could (Hasbrouck). The officers who were responsible for Taylor's death did not face any repercussions, as the grand jury decided to not charge the officers with her death. The second individual whose passing incited nationwide protests was George Floyd. He was an African American man who was brutally murdered on May 20th, 2020 by police officers. After buying cigarettes with a counterfeit \$20 bill, Floyd was handcuffed and pinned to the ground by a white police officer's knee. For 8 minutes and 46 seconds, Floyd begged for his life while four police officers stood by and did nothing. Floyd's death shed light on how it is "nearly impossible to hold police accountable for their actions" (Dreyer et al.). Only after weeks of protesting did the police officers face repercussions for their actions. The police officer with his knee on Floyd's neck was charged with second-degree manslaughter and second-degree murder, while the other three officers are facing aiding and abetting charges. Although the officers who were responsible for Floyd's death were charged, this accountability is the anomaly instead of the norm. The ability for law enforcement to routinely steal the lives of innocent black folk not only creates numerous tragedies every year but also causes "chronic fear and emotional trauma with terrible

implications for children, youth, and families” in Black communities. (Dreyer et al.). This begs the question of whether the nation has really made progress since the time of slavery before the Civil War.

Because of the aforementioned self-fulfilling prophecy, racist policing also results in the mass incarceration of Black folk. This is coupled with a lack of an incentive for the government to reform the criminal justice system, since inmates are not only seen as “exploitable workers, but also as captive consumers and tenants, as well as tickets to government money” (Pope). Prisons are the “ultimate company town” where prison staff can “force inmates to work, unilaterally set their wages, unilaterally set rent, force inmates to buy necessities from the company store, compel inmates to work beyond their normal release dates by driving them into debt, and use them to obtain public money for housing, punishing, and rehabilitating them.” (Pope). Although some scholars argue that slavery no longer exists with lower levels of personal prejudice among the community and a larger Black middle class overall, it is incontrovertible that the exploitation of black folk as free labor persists. The only difference when it comes to free labor is the location of control which has shifted from the plantation to the prison ground.

Targeted policing and mass incarceration still hold Black folk captive by the anti-Black racism that has been prevalent in this country for decades. Many Black scholars argue that “there has never been a time in American history where black people have been treated as full citizens, or even as fully human by the State” (Spencer & Parlow). With laws that seek to exploit Black individuals in a multitude of ways, it becomes evident that slavery has never truly been abolished. Even though Black folk no longer serve as slaves in the high school history course sense, they are still routinely subject to the repression and control of white folk in both policing practices and carceral labor exploitation.

With anti-Black racism “at the core of our society’s foundations,” the nexus question becomes: what can non-Black folk do to be actively anti-racist? (Spencer & Parlow). Unfortunately, the answer is not one that you will find in this paper. Those “who are being helped ought to be consulted over the matters that concern them” (Cole). As a non-black individual, I do not have the answer about how to help the Black members of our community. However, it is abundantly clear that sharing a post or two on Facebook or Instagram does not make you anti-racist. It instead feeds into the white savior industrial complex, “a valve for releasing the unbearable pressures that build in a system built on pillage,” where white and other non-Black folk can feel as though they have helped Black folk without producing tangible net benefits for Black populations (Cole). Sharing that post may allow one to feel as though they have contributed to the anti-racist struggle, but that is precisely the problem. White and other non-Black folk should actively resist having their “emotional needs satisfied” for no good reason. With very little thought, it is discernible that there is little to no good that will result from sharing such a post on social media.

In order to truly “move out of our comfort zone and address this long-standing injustice,” non-Black folk must choose to be actively anti-racist every day (Dreyer et al.). Get involved with Black-led movements and organizations. Support Black-owned businesses. Read books by Black academics and authors. However, non-Black folk should never feel satisfied by taking such actions. The moment that we feel good about our anti-racist practices, we become complicit with the anti-Black racism that the state upholds. Only by working with the Black community can we get rid of the row of plants that section off the well-constructed pathway and truly abolish all forms of slavery, allowing both the white couple and the slave laborers to coincide in harmony.

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